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## THE ONE-ACT PLAY AND THE SHORT STORY

One fateful night, we are told, a king was entertained at the home of his most famous general. But even as he supped, the treacherous host sat in another room of his castle, planning the murder of his royal guest. He mused upon the deed at length, until in the silence of his own chamber, he began to speak aloud:—

“If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly.”

And the significance of Macbeth's assertion is not confined to the complexity of the affairs which called it forth. In the light of our modern national crisis one may cling to literal interpretation of this statement and make a timely application to regicide thereby. But it would scarcely be an extreme perversion to extend the significance of this declaration further. Indeed the “key-words” of all modern life may be said to be, “‘Twere well it were done quickly!’”

Commercially, of course, the phrase has long since become a platitude, but its peculiar application to modern art has not been so frequently recognized. This tendency toward brevity and compression, though present in the whole sacred realm of art, is perhaps most phenomenal in the field of literature. In a certain sense the short story has already superseded the novel; and now its congenial cousin, the one-act play, has come to assume certain of the prerogatives of the traditional drama!

Of these two “short” forms, the short story having been longer with us, is better known. Its limits, possibilities, and technique have been so frequently exhibited as to require little critical comment. But the workings of the one-act play, though similar, are more abstruse. In either case, however, it is essential for a sane comparison that the form shall speak for itself.

A delightful introduction to the one-act play may be obtained in the little Irish plays of the peasantry. Most delightful among these are the farces of Lady Augusta Gregory. There is depicted in charming fashion the life and manners of the simple Irish folk. Simple situations, “out-of-the-way episodes,” single ideas, and few characters make up the effectiveness of each.

One of Lady Gregory's most typical playlets is the comic satire, *Spreading the News*. It has to do with a very old theme, the easy growth of gossip. Bartley Fallon brings no end of trouble on himself by doing a little neighborly act, that is, by running after Jack Smith with the hay fork the latter has left behind. On his way Bartley overturns the fruit basket of Mrs. Tarpey, the market woman. Unfortunately, Mrs. Tarpey is deaf, and later on, with the help of other members of the community, she gets a thrilling story in circulation. Bartley Fallon is said to have killed Jack Smith with a hay fork in order to get Jack's wife, Kitty Keary, and take her to America. The wake for Jack is even arranged when matters are complicated by the entrance, first of Bartley, and then of Jack himself. The humor of this situation is evident, and the delightful dialogue gives the play a certain inimitable charm.

As may be seen, this is only a "dramatized anecdote," without any particular complication of plot. In so short a space, there can, of course, be no character development, but there certainly is character portrayal, and that of a rather subtle sort. The characters of both Bartley and Mrs. Fallon are suggested by a few broad telling strokes, at the outset being connoted by this bit of sparkling dialogue:—

BARTLEY: "Indeed, it's a poor country and a scarce country to be living in. But I'm thinking if I went to America it's long ago the day I'd be dead."

MRS. FALLON: "So you might indeed."

BARTLEY: "And it's a great expense for a poor man to be buried in America."

MRS. FALLON: "Never fear, Bartley Fallon, but I'll give you a good burying the day you'll die."

BARTLEY: "Maybe it's yourself will be buried in the graveyard of Cloonmara before me, Mary Fallon, and I myself that will be dying unbeknownst some night and no one anear me. And the cat itself may be gone straying through the country, and the mice squeaking over the quilt."

MRS. FALLON: "Leave off talking of dying. It might be twenty years you'll be living yet."

BARTLEY [with a deep sigh]: "I'm thinking if I'll be living at the end of twenty years it's a very old man I'll be then!"

MRS. TARPEY [turns and sees them]: "Good morrow, Bartley Fallon, good morrow, Mrs. Fallon. Well, Bartley, you'll find no cause for complaining to-day; they are saying it was a good fair."

BARTLEY [raising his voice]: "It was not a good fair, Mrs. Tarpey; it was a scattered sort of fair. If we didn't expect more we got less. That's the way with me always. Whatever I have to sell goes down and whatever I have to buy goes up. If there's ever any misfortunes coming to this world it's on myself it pitches, like a flock of crows on seed potatoes."

Were these characters to be described in a short story they would undoubtedly lose some of the innate charm which the first-hand contact of the playlet reveals. In the one-act play a personal sense of companionship is gained through action and speech, while in the short story the characters are viewed more distantly and indirectly because of the combination of speech and action with description and analysis.

Thus at the hands of Henry James one might have the following exposition: "Bartley Fallon stood before his wife impatiently; he was sad and vexed and bitter. Almost with reprehensible sadness he rejected her optimistic philosophy for the future; his peculiar, poignant memory bringing constantly before him the ills to which he had been subject, causing him to deduce therefrom the awful vicissitude of all human life."

How utterly inadequate do such indirect methods become in the treatment of this vivacious Irish life! We would not underestimate the value of psychological action, meaning by action "a change in human relations." There is, however, a possibility that there has been of late an extreme psychological emphasis in the short story; so it is refreshing to find more frequently in the one-act play the action which results in a deed. And in plays like *Spreading the News* physical action has its importance.

Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* has a theme very similar to that of Hardy's *Three Strangers*. The remarkable kinship of the one-act play and the short story could not be better illustrated than by a comparison of these two. There is a compression about the play, for the narrow compass demands that the dialogue, though entertaining, be succinct. It is not so with

Hardy's story. His exposition is verbose but rightly so; though the plot is undoubtedly well handled, primarily the interest is in style. Though Lady Gregory's work is here, as usual, given a fine artistic finish, somehow the thing as a whole seems a bit bare after Hardy's complete and illuminating descriptions. There is probably more intensity in *The Rising of the Moon* but not so satisfying a picture of human life as *The Three Strangers* gives us.

*Hyacinth Halvey* is another farce by Lady Gregory. It has to do with a young fellow who, in spite of himself, is regarded as a model of righteousness. It is difficult to see how this theme could have been made effective in narration; indeed, in that form it would probably seem disgustingly trite. One great advantage of the one-act play over the short story is that by intense dramatic representation it can so subtly re-dress an old theme.

The same advantage is found in the delightful little sketch *The Workhouse Ward*. This again is a farce of character, being concerned with two wrangling but inseparable old wards. The constant disputes and argument serve to bring the author's gifts in dialogue to the foreground, illustrating well her own remark that "it is better to be quarreling than to be lonesome."

But these plays of the Irish peasantry are not all comedies. A certain tragic dignity is found in such one-act plays as Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate*, or John M. Synge's *The Riders to the Sea*.

The latter is, on the whole, simply an impression, but a powerful impression. In fact there is little to forget, because there is so little action. The illumination is great just because there is no thesis, there is simply a transcendent picture of life. In even so short a compass the reader's experience is permanently enriched; he learns for the first time to know the commonplace of death in a community of fishermen; and he is purged by vicarious suffering.

Now if this same theme were to be developed in the short story it might have a tendency to become sentimental; it would then demand a fuller treatment, and there is danger in expanding what is best when only stated. But here in this little drama, Synge's masterpiece, there is nothing irreverent, nothing cheap.

From the tragic it is only a step to the horrible. From the tragedy of death as depicted by Synge we pass to the fear of death as Maeterlinck portrays it. Since time immemorial one type of the short story has sought to give us the atmosphere of wonder and of mystery. What, then, can the one-act play do in the way of creating this illusive, artful something, this emotional atmosphere? In Maeterlinck's one-act plays perhaps the answer can be found.

In *The Interior*, *The Intruder*, and *The Blind* there is developed a world-old sentiment, that of fear in the presence of death. The author does this by presenting a tableau, accompanied by dialogue. There are really no characters, but puppets, and the author relies upon the dialogue alone for effect. This consists of only the briefest questions, answers, and exclamations. For example, in *The Intruder* Death comes into a family circle as a definitely personified, although unseen and intangible presence, filling the hearts of those present with an awful, nameless dread. A short quotation will illustrate this.

THE UNCLE speaks first: "How is the weather?"

DAUGHTER: "Very fine. Do you hear the nightingales?"

THE UNCLE: "Yes, yes!"

GRANDFATHER: "A little wind is rising in the avenue, Ursula."

DAUGHTER: "Yes, the trees are stirring a little."

THE UNCLE: "It is surprising that my sister should not be here yet."

GRANDFATHER: "I do not hear the nightingales any longer, Ursula."

DAUGHTER: "I believe someone has come into the garden, grandfather."

GRANDFATHER: "Who is it?"

Foreboding, fear, wonder, mystery, and atmosphere, all are subtly suggested by so elliptical a form, by nothing more than breathless utterances.

Now, how does the short story portray the horrible? Look at Maupassant's *The Horla* or any number of Poe's horrible tales, and the contrast of treatment is evident. In his *Philosophy of Composition* Poe tells us that the proper way to begin a story is with the consideration of an effect, using "brevity in

direct ratio to the intensity of the intended effect, with the proviso that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all."

This requisite degree of duration must mean quite an extended one, judging from the length of Poe's own stories. His method of getting his effect, like that of many other short-story writers, seems to be that of dilating upon the horrible, either to the point of exhaustion or of repulsion.

Illustrations of this tendency may be found by the reader on every side. Take for example *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It will be remembered that the person who relates this story is represented as sitting in a certain dismal room of the house (it is described at length), reading to his companion, and hearing creaks and groans, wailings and gratings innumerable. "At the termination of this sentence," the narrator states, after innumerable hints at horror, "I started and for a moment paused; for it appeared to me, (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me, that from some very remote portion of the mansion there came, indistinctly to my ears . . . that very creaking, and ripping sound." Again we are kept in long suspense while this poor person goes on reading his not too cheerful tale. Then the story proper continues: "Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement; for there could be no doubt whatever that in this instance I did actually hear . . . a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound."

By this time the reader gets pretty nervous, and is willing that the suspense should end, but obviously Poe has not yet achieved "the degree of duration, absolutely requisite for the production of his effect." We are spared nothing. At length, however, our worst fears are realized, for with "the potency of a spell the huge antique panels . . . threw slowly back upon the instant their ponderous and ebony jaws. . . . Without these doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher." But even this is not enough. "There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame"!!!

In the one-act play, it may be readily seen, we could not be

brought face to face with the supernatural without taking a sudden jump from the sublime to the ridiculous. Whatever the literary value of a play, it cannot, in every sense, lose its capacity for being staged and still remain a play. So the horrible here must be given by suggestion and tacit inference rather than by concrete representation. On the other hand, the short story is never visualized, except in imagination. Even so, upon reading Maeterlinck and Poe consecutively, one cannot but remember that timely remark made by Charlton Andrews: "A taste of anything is often acceptable where a mouthful would be repellent"!!

The purpose of this protraction of the horrible in a short story is mainly that of suspense and artistic portraiture. But the uncanny atmosphere of a one-act play however æsthetically given can scarcely be sufficient *excuse* for its own existence. There must be something behind all this horror and mystery, and the symbolism must be more weighty than the artistic sort shown in Kipling's *They*.

And so Maeterlinck, in so short a play as *The Blind*, gives us an unusual and profound symbolism. Why all of these blind people, old and young, around a dead priest and a friendly dog? What is the presence which enters so strangely? Eminent critics have sought to explain this subtle little one-act play with lengthy discussions. One of them begins thus: "On the island of time, in the sea of eternity, are huddled together darkened souls, unaware of their destiny—and relying for help upon a priesthood now dead." And such considerations have been awakened by a tableau and the briefest possible dialogue!

Yes, the playlet would teach as well as entertain. William Yeats in his *Hour Glass* would preach as helpful a doctrine as Hawthorne in his *Ethan Brand*, or suggest, possibly, some thoughts like those aroused by Kipling's *Bridge Builders*. The thought in the latter is, however, more complete and complex than could be developed in the space and form which Yeats employs.

But few one-act plays are so symbolistic in entirety as those of Maeterlinck. One often finds a combination of symbolism and realism, as in some of the playlets of Sudermann and, perhaps in less degree, in those of Strindberg. In two works of the



*Morituri* this is peculiarly evident, that is, *Teja* and *The Eternal Masculine*. Various developments of the love element found so often in the modern one-act play are seen here, but combined with this there is a certain sense of generality and allegory. As a consequence the characters are rather types than individuals, the mouthpieces of a class rather than distinct personalities. Thus in *The Eternal Masculine* we are introduced to the Queen, the Painter, the Marshal, and so forth. Likewise in sentiment there is a generality, somewhat sweeping in application. Thus at one point in *The Eternal Masculine* the Painter speaks: "And in the end, however one may work and strive, it is *man's destiny*; he must die of woman."

In Strindberg's generally recognized masterpiece, *Pariah*, one finds something of this same tendency. Mr. X, an archæologist, and Mr. Y, a traveler from America, are one-half human and the other half symbolic. For the peculiar combination of these two tendencies the one-act play seems preëminently fitted, and for some reason the reader will submit to this sort of thing in a one-act play far more gracefully than he will when it is attempted in short-story form.

*Pariah* is a splendid illustration of the excellence of good one-act-play technique. The whole work is concentrated dialogue, which, because of its remarkable unity, carries the play forward with almost marvelous rapidity. Scarcely one line could be eliminated "without definite injury, if not destruction, to the whole."

In *Facing Death* Strindberg gives us an ugly picture, and the effect as a whole is morbid and unhealthy. Somehow we like this kind of realism better in the story, for example in one such as Hardy sometimes employs. We want it mediated; even a taste taken directly in the one-act play makes a person's mouth "puckery."

But by far the greater number of one-act plays are of a healthier nature, though they often deal with the follies and secret tragedies of modern life. Among the one-act plays which seem most akin to the story are those of George Middleton, which he himself styles "plays of contemporary life." They deal with intense moments in the lives of thinking, feeling men and women. As Mid-

dleton himself expresses it, they "make no pretense save to show character in action, and in several instances to picture its different reactions from the same stimulus." "Certain ideas," he tells us, "find their best expression in the concentrated episode." And so it is, perhaps, with themes of social criticism; to be best treated they must be dramatic, and if dramatic the play best sets them forth. Leisurely exposition could easily cause a theme like that of Middleton's *The Man Masterful* or *In His House* to become disgustingly trite and flat. It is perhaps the extreme brevity of these studies which stimulates our interest.

But themes like those of Phillpotts's *Hiatus* are common to the story as well as to the play. Kipling's *Without Benefit of Clergy* is a fine example of how even illicit love may be handled in a way to arouse only the finer emotions. But here, instead of dramatic fervor or any sentimentality, the reader finds a simple pathos and a sympathetic human interest.

In Barrie, also, we find this same fondness for the distinctly modern theme. It is particularly evident in both *Rosalind* and *The Twelve Pound Look*. The idea of *Woman's Emancipation* is exploited in every form of literature. The short story, no less than the playlet, is constantly setting it forth. We must, however, concede to Barrie the ability to deal subtly with a hackneyed theme. Poor Lady Sims, unconsciously envying her husband's former wife, says to Sir Harry, who has been making light of the capabilities of the typist: "Yes, but she has a very contented face."

SIR HARRY [with a stamp of his foot]: "All put on. What?"

LADY SIMS [timidly]: "I didn't say anything."

SIR HARRY [snapping]: "One would think you envied her."

LADY SIMS: "Envied? Oh no—but I thought she looked so alive and active. It was while she was working the machine."

SIR HARRY: "Alive! That's no life. It's you that are alive" [curtly]. "I'm busy Emmy." [He sits at his writing table.]

LADY SIMS [dutifully]: "I'm sorry. I'll go, Harry. [Inconsequentially] Are they very expensive?"

SIR HARRY: "What?"

LADY SIMS: "Those machines."

Such is the charming and whimsical presentation of a problem so common to both story and play. The same theme may be found in almost any story of the current magazines. Even *Smith's* for May, 1917, contains a short story of this sort, *Ferdinald and Ferdinald*. A girl with unusual executive powers secretly assumes charge of her father's *very large* department store in the absence of the father, thereby averting an awful business calamity at a very crucial moment. The almost superhuman insight of this very modern young lady may be a little overdrawn, but, with apologies to Barrie, we must admit that this is only another phase of the same question: "What, oh what, is 'woman's field'?"

The short plays of Percy MacKaye seem quite in a class by themselves, due to the peculiar themes of the author. He himself styles them "Yankee interpretations in the spirit of fancy." All five of these "Yankee fantasies" illustrate well the "subtle fusings and crystallizings" of which the author speaks in his prefacing comment.

The characters such as Chuck, Julie Bonheur, Jonas Boutwell, and Link Tadbourne are not only remarkably portrayed but touched with an original quaint loveliness. Julie, the Cannuck, who wins so strangely the heart of the supposed "Yankee"—John, and Link who lives over in excited fashion the days of Gettysburg; Jonas, the peculiar yet endearing minister—these are as subtle as any character sketches of the short story.

Among innumerable other one-act play masterpieces are those of the inimitable Lord Dunsany. After a dozen words we find ourselves almost miraculously swept along toward *The Glittering Gate*, and are soon left breathless but smiling at the sorrowful discovery of the ex-thief, that—"there ain't no heaven." Somehow were this expanded into a Daudet story form it would lose its sparkling vitality and become a half-dead thing.

In the same convincing manner of *The Glittering Gate*, one finds himself suddenly concerned over the *Lost Silk Hat*. Of all the characters here, perhaps one appreciates the poet best. He speaks fluently, eloquently, gracefully;—characteristically losing himself in his enthusiastic declamations. It will be remembered that the poet appeals to the caller not to go back and get his hat, but to join the Bosnians. "I appeal to you in the

name of beautiful battles, high deeds, and lost causes," says this "transcendentalist," "in the name of love-tales told to cruel maidens and told in vain. What is a hat? Will you sacrifice for it a beautiful doom? Think of your bones, neglected and forgotten, lying forlornly because of hopeless love on endless golden sand. 'Lying forlorn,' as Keats said. What a word! Forlorn in Africa! The careless Bedouins going past by day, at night the lions roar, the grievous voice of the desert."

But of course the caller does go back and prosaically forgetting the poetical love quarrel sings a duet with the lady of his choice! But Dunsany would have us to see the "tragedy" of the situation; as the poet startlingly expresses it to the policeman, this gentleman has "killed Romance!"

And so one might continue indefinitely, finding always in the one-act play as in the short story, variety of theme, variety of treatment, and of charm. From the darkness of Sudermann, the frank symbolism of Maeterlinck, the blending of humor and pathos in St. John Ervine, the downright fun or sorrow in Lady Gregory, to the bright laughter or wonder of Lord Dunsany—this is the range of the one-act play. As broad is it as that of the short story as shown in Poe, Hawthorne, Mérimée, Kipling, Daudet, James, Bunner, and a host of others. The idea involved in both may be little or big, light as in a typical play of Percival Wilde or a story by Fannie Heaslip Peabody, weighty as in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, or Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*.

In each we expect a skilful technique; indeed, both demand a fineness of construction. But where we might endure a little extraneous material in the short story, we cannot permit it in the one-act play. The latter form must always remain a supreme example of concentration, intensity, and "crystallization."

There are those with us who decry both the brief story and the brief play because of their limitations. To be sure, it must be admitted that in these shorter forms problems do not have to be solved, and certain arbitrary premises can well be taken. Both the dramatist and the novelist, on the other hand, have to possess a keener and more penetrating imagination, and a finer discrimination than the authors of the short story and the one-act play.

The man who masters the short form may, indeed, be insane, but possibly there is nothing more worth while or delightful than to lose, occasionally, the propriety which is so immortal, and descend to the depths of a powerful and pleasing insanity. Sometimes limitation spells advantage. With Percy MacKaye we may say that these distinctive forms are capable of expressing what the longer forms cannot.

Even granting the very questionable statement of certain critics, that both forms are doomed to die in a few years, there is a joy and satisfaction in the immediate present. And even the wise prophets cannot deny this. After all, if experiments, they are "creative experiments."

So we return to Macbeth as he sits in his castle, planning the murder of his royal guest. Again we would venture a literary application of his regicidal musing:—

"If 'twere done when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly."

And in the light of modern workmanship one might be forgiven for adding this explanatory sentiment:—

"For 'tis not only quickly done but *well!*"

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